

The Temple of Culture

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“Master, do you think this is a place abandoned by God?”

“Dear Adzo, do you know a place where God would have felt at home?”

— Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*

Silence envelops Yair Barak’s photographs, yet this is not the silence preceding a storm; if anything, it is the silence that follows in its aftermath – like that pervading the stately seaside houses deserted at the end of a noisy summer, or the silence of the trees standing naked in the white snow, or of the house stripped of its architectural details and reduced to a white geometric form. This silence, which is inherently related to the idea of a storm, is similarly alluded to by the terrifying skeleton of a deserted soccer stadium – a vast, vacant space in the process of becoming a “white elephant.” This is also the silence of a reading room. And one may, indeed, read: For instance, that the house cloaked in white is Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House, an icon of modernist architecture; that the lake is the Wannsee lake on the outskirts of Berlin, and that the summer house on its shore was used during the Second World War by top SS commanders, who assembled there in 1941 to draft the Final Solution for the annihilation of European Jewry.¹ Barak’s photographs are pervaded by the silent charge of both history and culture. More precisely, we could say that the silence that envelops Yair Barak’s exhibition, the silence into which his images introduce us, is that found

in the eye of the storm: silence in the eye of culture.

The immediate, general affinity addressed in Barak's work is thus the underlying affinity between photography and culture, which is related to an understanding of the revolution brought about by photography as a "cultural revolution." Photography does not merely play a significant role in shaping contemporary culture; it is also the technology through which culture (or culturalism, or perhaps actually multiculturalism) has transformed the current age into such an unbearably "cultural" one. Photography plays an active and central role in rendering our existence cultural, while simultaneously making our culture into an existential one.² Or, as the title of this exhibition seems to imply, the photographic image is defined by an inherent shortcoming that stems from its gravitation towards culture and assimilation into it, and from culture's gravitation towards, and assimilation into, the photographic image. Photography is a technology that was conjured up by the imagination, only to encounter a reality that surpasses the imagination. In this sense, we could say that the "silence in the eye of culture," which is also the "silence marking the absence of culture" – that silence captured by Barak's photographs – represents a critical stance. Seen from this perspective, photography does not merely offer an arena for examining the relations between the photographic image and culture; it is also a medium capable of producing images that undermine the limits within which culture and photography engage in a process of mutual enslavement.³

II

An aging couple is seated at a reading table. One would assume that both the man and the woman were born close to the end of the Second World War, or were perhaps already young children during its course. The man is immersed in reading a large, thin volume. The light burns its pages. The woman's bag has been set down casually at the edge of the table, close to the window, within arm's reach – as if pushed aside with the back of her hand so that it wouldn't intrude. In contrast to her husband, who sinks back in his chair, his attention devoted entirely to his reading material, the woman seems to have no intention of remaining seated for long. She too has a thin volume spread out before her, but she seems to have momentarily stopped reading. Or perhaps she has yet to begin. She appears to have just put on her glasses, and to be attempting to adjust her eyesight. And while her hand reaches towards the glass case, she gazes out from one space of silence into another, momentarily staring into space.

Is she gazing at the water lilies at the edge of the lake outside the window? Can she see, through the lush vegetation, the pedal boat leisurely making its way across the lake? Or has her attention been caught by the group of men who have taken off their shirts, and who are busy applying lotion by the van? Is she attempting to conjure up an image of what she was just reading about, to imagine that fateful conference that took place in the same room in which she is now seated? Or is her questioning gaze perhaps merely the by-product

of the failure to conjure up such an image, the failure to grasp the historical turning point related to this place?

The video work *Big House* (Yair Barak and Hadass Marder), and especially the image of the couple sitting in the reading room, may serve as a key for understanding Barak's work. To begin with, this video seems to present a series of images planted into a temporal continuum – not so much in order to be transformed into a film, but rather in order to establish an affinity between history and the photographic image, in distinction from other modes of producing images. More specifically, this video work points us towards a historical moment of crisis in Western culture: a crisis that may be understood as stemming from the parallel evolution of technologies designed to capture, reproduce and distribute images, and the commitment of atrocities that could be contained by neither history nor culture. These are atrocities that could not be reduced to signs or represented in images – ones that neither necessitated nor demanded representation.⁴ The image of the man and woman in the reading room draws a parallel between their relationship and the relationship between photography and culture, which literally evolves on two different levels within the image: What appears “on the table” is related to culture: to reading, remembering, and reflecting, to conscious awareness, to the gaze, to leisure, to estrangement, to solitude. Then there are those things that take place “under the table,” such as the movement of the man and woman's legs – which perform an unconscious and spontaneous dialogue that is both sensual and formal; an aesthetic dialogue. This dialogue is echoed by

the leg of the marble sculpture, and is further echoed by the concrete columns surrounding the soccer stadium – that modern amphitheater, or temple of display.

Finally, we may identify the gaze of the woman, who is (nevertheless) attempting to see something while the man across from her remains immersed in his book, with that special gaze produced by Barak's photographic project more generally; a gaze directed at a self-involved culture, with which it shares an intimate relationship. A gaze that attempts to operate at the highest resolution possible in order to try and conjure up a legible image, despite the experience of estrangement and sinking with which it is faced. This is a form of photography that attempts to capture and engage in an aesthetic dialogue that will support and enable the operation of a critical gaze vis-à-vis all that is taken for granted (culture, photography, reality).

III

It is no coincidence that the photographs featured in this exhibition are all related to buildings – or, more precisely, to houses. For it seems that the space in which Barak situates us – that space of silence in the eye of the storm – is both a space of intimacy, beauty, and peace, and an estranged, impenetrable space threatened by extinction. The American summer houses on the Jersey Shore have been left to face the encroaching darkness on their own, the little remaining sunlight illuminating their outlines as they are about

to be swallowed into the surrounding black expanse. Barak's images similarly maintain their form, their sense of decorum, their affinity with tradition. They too await the exposure to light necessary to illuminate their immutable contours. The silence surrounding them draws its power from the thrust towards both abstraction and simplicity; it stems from the encounter between the sensual and the formal, which are brought together by the aesthetic gesture. This silence seems to counterbalance the visual image's repeated attempts to touch upon the concept, while the aesthetic gesture enables Barak to capture the moment in which the image becomes equal to the concept, in which image and concept come to entertain a literal relationship.

When I speak of the literal quality of Barak's works, I am referring to the manner in which his images capture moments of complex – or, more accurately, sublime – simplicity.⁵ The photographer's gaze does not travel or wander through wide-open expanses. Instead, it examines domesticated spaces (a reality that is the living room; the public sphere that we treat as if it were private). His photographs are as simple as a scientific law or a geometric form violently severed from the future and propelled back into its own past, to its point of origin, as if cast back upon the "white on white" expanse from which it emerged.⁶ This mode of action, however, does not "bolster" the concept of the home; on the contrary, the house effaced by whiteness and placed on a blanket of white snow is now hovering in space. The background that once supported it – as a background is supposed to do – is no longer clearly legible. Is the house situated in front of the trees or in back of them? One could determine the answer to this question with no great difficulty, but that is not the point. It is not the role of the image to resolve the existential

distress that accompanies the sense of intimate belonging to a given place. The literalness of the photograph, which casts the image back onto itself, is not designed to offer any form of respite, or clarification, but rather insists on what is pertinent to the present moment, what depends on the changing seasons.⁷

The series “American Houses” – which includes the photographs of Farnsworth House and of the stately seaside homes – presents two different ways of treating the same historical term – namely, modernism. This is a term that Barak seeks to identify with, to call home, insisting on its relevance to the present. And while Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House constitutes a point of reference to “modernism” as a historical, artistic and cultural term, the dramatic photographs of the summer houses relate “modernism” to its origins in Caravaggio’s chiaroscuro, and in the later Romantic play of light and shadow. They relate modernism to the birth of photography. The paradoxical character of the recently constructed summer houses, which appear as imitations of images from an architectural magazine, stems from the ambivalence underlying modernism – from the dissonance produced by a historical period that attempted to sever its relationship to history. This ambivalence is related to the union of history, or culture (as an aspect of history) with technologies designed to capture, reproduce and distribute images, and thus to undermine their historical status. And memory, in this context, is paradoxically exchanged for remembering. Yet while the stately American houses seem to have been created in order to remind us, in some vague way, of something “traditional” – that is, while they flaunt their relationship to tradition – Barak’s photographs plant them back in a

(concrete) historical sphere, so that their silent presence itself appears as a form of protest. These are images that do not simply remind us of something, but ones that actually participate in the process of remembering. Stamped onto our memory, they transform it into a stately house – albeit one that is not regularly inhabited, which may at times exist only in an abstract manner, as a possibility awaiting realization, a place where one comes to rest, to make contact. Like the stadium whose location may have been forgotten, yet whose function is still remembered (in contrast to the instances in which memory settles down and is transformed into a house, into the site of a melancholic form of nostalgia and sinking).

IV

The eclipse towards which Barak's work directs us, the eclipse in the course of which the photographed image and culture cast their dark shadows upon one another, is an existential eclipse. This eclipse is related to our belonging to this culture, to the present time, to what is taking place right here – in the house overtaken by concepts severed from history and images produced and consumed without any form of discernment. In this hour of darkness, both images and concepts disappear, leaving us caught between the tyranny of judgment and sentimentalism as we confront a reality abandoned by culture and a culture abandoned by reality. Yair Barak's images "respond" to this state from within the silence at the eye of the storm: Do you know a place in which

images and concepts could feel at home?

1 During the 1990s, the house in which the Wasee Conference took place was transformed into a Holocaust memorial site.

2 The technology of capturing, reproducing and disseminating images enables the public at large to constantly consume culture. At the same time, the images that nourish our culture have become unexceptional and banal. Moreover, it is worth noting that up until this turning point, which took place in the course of the 20th century, the creation of cultural products was not motivated by any rational or existential necessity. On the contrary, most cultural products were the result of liberation from existential distress and proof of the creator's "free time." (One should take care not to confuse "free time," which does not contradict the creator's existential distress, with "leisure time," which refers to a form of temporary pleasure, and is characteristic of contemporary, "existential" culture).

3 One may think of culture's enslavement to photography in relation to our perception of photography as a mere technology for the production of images – that is, of culture. At the same time, the cultural enslavement of photography is related to the privileged status of the visible in our culture, so that photographic or other images are perceived as facts, or as the real. In this sense, the cultural hegemony of the 20th century is characterized by the transformation of the imaginary into the real.

4 In this sense, one may note that the same reciprocal gravitation and assimilation of culture and photography towards one another, and their assimilation into one another, have led – following the moment of historical crisis – to largely perverse practices.

5 In his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), which lays the foundation for modern aesthetic thought, Kant argues that although the sublime is a powerful and even destructive force, its nature is simple (much like moral law). This definition of the sublime may also serve to explain the immediate and explicit affinity between the image of Farnsworth House and the dramatic images of the summer houses.

6 In this sense, Barak's photographs are shaped by an inverted temporal structure, in which the future determines the outcome of an occurrence in the past. This structure, which was first discussed by Kant, was later described by Heidegger as the subject's existential experience of time (Dasein), and examined by Freud in the context of his analysis of trauma and repression.

7 In this sense, one may argue that Barak's photographs participate in creating a new and critical definition of photography as a technology designed to create scientific images of historical concepts.

